

By Brenda Battat



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From the Executive Director's Desk

2013 International Consumer Electronic Show

At the invitation of the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) I attended the 2013 International CES (Consumer Electronic Show) in Las Vegas. Together with representatives from the blind community we met with exhibitors to learn about their approach to making products accessible to people with hearing and vision loss. With more than 3,000 exhibits, 800 speakers and 150,000 attendees (35,000 from outside the United States), it was clear that innovation is alive and well but you have to design a game-plan of who and what you want to visit to avoid being totally overwhelmed.

CEA staff arranged for us to have face time with companies that provided a great opportunity to convey to engineers and innovators what they can do to enhance our use of their products and services. It's impossible to cover here all the neat ideas and trends that we saw—the waterproof, dustproof and shockproof hearing aid; the wrist watch that senses emergency sounds such as fire trucks and ambulances; the speech-to-text technology; 3-D printing; controlling your phone and music player in your car through gestures; a hearing aid that seals with a balloon in the ear canal; bone-conduction headphones; TVs with screen readers for menu and guide access in multi-languages; self-driving cars; smart home monitoring devices to keep seniors safe in their homes—and that's just a sprinkling.

We had good conversations with sound companies about high-quality accessible audio. Imagine being able to adjust the sound of the dialogue versus the background sounds on your TV. Yes this could be a reality. We had decided to give audio quality a focus and were fortunate to have Richard Einhorn, an HLAA member and expert sound producer and engineer there to explain to engineers what people with hearing loss need and why sound quality and signal-to-noise ratio is so critical for them.

Accessibility is not front and center by any means at CES today. But this visit was a start by CEA to change that. In a wrap-up meeting with CEA staff and board members we looked to the future and discussed the need for CES to have accessibility tracks, displays of accessible products in a central location, awards recognizing accessible design and other ways to bring more awareness and visibility to accessibility at the show next year, January 7–10, 2014, always in Las Vegas. To see some highlights of this year go to <http://ces.cnet.com/>. 

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More on Telecommunications Equipment Distribution Programs

In the last executive director's column, we stated that Connecticut was one of the states that did not have an equipment distribution program. Since then we have learned that the Connecticut Telecommunications Relay Service contracted with Sprint and loans telecommunication equipment to Connecticut residents who are deaf, hard of hearing, or speech impaired. There is no cost for this equipment. The equipment is managed under a contract with Converse Communications Corporation, a Connecticut-based company. The equipment includes TTYs, and amplified and captioned phones. There is no eligibility criterion related to income of the applicant.

For a List of Equipment Distribution Programs, go to www.hearingloss.org, and click on Support on the top menu, then Financial Assistance, then Equipment Distribution.